
Research Paper

The Informal Syndicate Raj:

Emerging urban governance challenges in newly incorporated villages of Bidhan Nagar Municipal Corporation, West Bengal

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Abstract

*Peri-urban spaces in the Global South are regarded as sites of radical and often violent of transformation of social and spatial structures, of brutal dispossessions of lives and livelihoods to make way for speculative real estate development and the accumulation of capital through the expropriation and commodification of land. What kinds of politics and governance configurations emerge in the peri-urban areas of mega-cities? A host of state and non-state actors such as developers, aspiring middle-class urban dwellers are reimagining these sites. This paper investigates the complex governance and livelihood transformations following the upgradation of Bidhan Municipality to a Corporation in 2015 through the state driven merger of the existing planned satellite township of Salt Lake with the surrounding unplanned rural and urban areas. The paper argues that a new politics of unsteady alliances characterises the messy, unsettled and restless territories of the newly formed Municipal Corporation. A highly contingent, informalised and powerful configuration of non-state actors – locally known as **Syndicates** control the development dynamics and political fortunes of the periphery.*

Keywords

Informal sovereign, periurban governance, land acquisition, political party

1. Introduction: The conflicting stakes in governing the fragmented urban periphery

The frontiers of urban areas are particularly volatile and dynamic where urbanisation is posited as the primary driver of economic growth and the harbinger of socio-spatial transformation from rural to urban (Roy). Contestation and violence against people and their habitats is central to this process whether it is carried out in a planned manner by the state and market or through informal means wherein land is subdivided into layouts and its use is converted from agricultural to non-agricultural with the active collusion of state and non-state actors. Along with the displacement and dispossession of the erstwhile peasants and other groups of people living and working in the urban fringes, peripheral urbanisation processes hasten the erasure of histories of people – their identities, their economy, their social ties, kinship and caste networks, collective associations and institutions, their common property resources, and their built and lived habitats. It leads also to an incredible socio-spatial churning, as groups continue to be simultaneously settled and unsettled, often clashing with

one another over control of territories, access to resources and cultures (Gururani). The resulting territory is therefore characterised by uneven urban development, splintered, fragmented, incomplete geographies of being and becoming urban or resisting urbanisation (Cowan, Gururani).

While studies have highlighted the different trajectories of peripheral urbanisation, or examined the drivers of peri-urbanisation (particularly the role of the state and the market), and the impact of socio-spatial transformations on the original inhabitants of these areas, there has been little work on the ways in which different sets of actors struggle to a) reassert, or consolidate their power, authority, collectively mobilise access and claims to the emerging urban periphery through different and perhaps new regimes of territorial governance arrangements and b) assert their agency in reclaiming and remaking one's identity and making sense of the changed reality through varied, incremental, contested strategies of place-making.

However given the dynamic and emerging nature of the periphery, there is very little understanding of what kind of relationships and mediations emerge between different groups that live and work here. What kind of relationships, strategic yet unstable alliances are forged between these new and old actors – particularly between erstwhile (internally displaced) farmers and the new migrants? How is the relationship between land and labour reconstituted through new circuits of capital accumulation and regimes of governance? How is the shifting terrain of the periphery mediated, structured and governed? How are inhabitants making sense and attaching meaning to these spaces and in turn being influenced by the dynamic shifts in the landscape? What kind of power structures and locally contingent assemblages have been carved out to influence and control these processes of large scale transformations and the limits of such influence? And finally, what can the study of these relationships, everyday practices, contestation and negotiations reveal about the future of urban peripheries as viable and livable places?

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks: Informal sovereigns and everyday governance

Urban governance in the periphery, particularly the formal institutional mechanism is characterised by multiple authorities, overlapping jurisdictions, lack of coordination and fragmentation that lead to further problems in articulating decisions as there might be internal contradictions and conflicts (Dupont, Cowan). Thus while the merger reflects a political decision to bring in more votes or consolidate control over a particular territory by reconfiguring the existing political boundaries, it may also lead to emerging fractions and conflicts as a result of the fallout of the new power sharing arrangements. Moreover, while the rationale for the merger is to attract central government funds in order to undertake large scale policy driven infrastructure improvement projects, the governance situation in the context of a newly cobbled local body presents multiple challenges as interests and stakes are at cross purposes. This is exacerbated by the socio-economic divergence, cultures, aspirations for development and widely divergent political mobilisation across the three localities. Thus while there are elected members and elite, politically connected middle class lobbies in Salt Lake, based on the idea of tax paying propertied citizens, the governance of the gram panchayat areas is often under the control of big men, or party leaders with particular elite

caste/class backgrounds or land owning privileges, or the ability to use muscle power, and/or lend money and negotiate with state level functionaries.

Given that the peri urban area is characterized by fragmented and overlapping governance arrangements and conflicting interests of locally elected representatives, infrastructure and services continue to develop in an uneven and unequal manner, creating archipelagos of well serviced areas (Graham and Marvin). Therefore, new actors emerge in the interstices of service provisions, trying to bridge the gap in terms of service provisioning (Simone) and also staking out an opportunity to control new territories (Lund, Hansen and Seputtat). In return of these services/infrastructure/resources, these powerful local entities are able to extend their control over the locality, or command votes and allegiance (Lund, Cornea). In this case, there are powerful syndicates which have emerged in the area who control the pattern of urbanisation in the area, and the local economy by exerting their influence over labour, construction material supply and the negotiated arrangements they carve out with the new and powerful urban institutions that dot the landscape – from parastatals and development agencies, to newly elected ward councillors in the newly formed corporation. These informal sovereigns (Lund) could take the form of Syndicates or local clubs (Cornea) and often overlap with the local political parties and yet are also important intermediaries. They are critical to the everyday governance of these dynamic frontier urban areas and specific to the political economic context of West Bengal.

The paper is based upon my dissertation fieldwork in 2008 and 2009, followed by subsequent research projects through ethnographic fieldwork by Masters and MPhil students in 2013, 2015. In 2017, in depth, semi structured interviews with key person residents (6 total) and elected councilors (9 total) from the three merged spatial units were carried out by a PhD student to understand the dynamics and the impacts of the merger. In addition to the field level primary data collection, newspaper archives, government reports and documents were also studied in detail for secondary data.

3. Introduction to the Case study area: Bidhannagar Municipal Corporation and its surrounding areas

The North eastern periphery of Kolkata has been shaped through multiple and highly contested state driven attempts at urbanising rural agricultural and ecologically sensitive areas. In the early sixties a planned new satellite township called Salt Lake was created to decongest the city of Kolkata. A strong regulatory regime controlled the supply, subdivision, and sale or transfer of lands in these planned townships, and the entry of private players was strictly regulated by the state (Sengupta, 2013). As this township began to get populated, spurred by the setting up of the Special Economic Zone in Sector V of the township, the villages around the township began to be transformed in an unplanned and haphazard fashion. In the mid 90s, the Left Front Government decided on urbanization as a strategy to attract businesses and investments into the state. The rural areas adjoining Salt Lake city (Bidhan Nagar Municipality) was chosen as the site for the setting up of the Rajarhat New Township, three times the size of Salt Lake. Massive displacements and dispossessions of farmers, share croppers, fisherfolk and others dependent on the rural economy were hushed up by the State to enable the acquisition and development of Rajarhat New Town. These processes in turn created a ripple effect in the peripheries with private developers, big and small, buying up

villages, converting ponds and wetlands to gated urban complexes through speculative urban development. Eventually, the discontent of the erstwhile villagers led to a political denouncement of the LFG and the Trinamul Congress (TMC) came to power in West Bengal in 2011 with promises of protecting the rights of farmers and villagers from predatory capitalists.

In May 2015, the West Bengal government headed by TMC formed the Bidhannagar Municipal Corporation (BMC) through the official merger of three territorially distinct, socio-economically diverse, administratively separate settlements - Salt Lake City (a planned satellite township and a municipality), Rajarhat-Gopalpur town (an older, unplanned peripheral urban area and municipality) and parts of Mahishbathan (a rural Gram Panchayat area on the fringes of Salt Lake). This was ostensibly a top down, state driven strategy to enable the sustainable development of these extremely disparate and unevenly developed areas. The state government also argued that it would be easier to access central government schemes such as Smart Cities Mission, AMRUT etc. due to the changed administrative status to a Corporation.

It resulted in the delimitation of the geographical area into 41 wards through a process of violent territorial reshuffling – administrative boundaries being redrawn, territorial mergers and divisions that have had far reaching socio-political consequences in terms of reconfiguring existing power structures and institutional arrangements of decision making across state and non-state actors. Accompanying these shifts in power relations, alliances and alignments as well as notion of territoriality are the emerging conflicts, aspirations and claims over the control, management and distribution of resources and urban services, particularly land, water and labour. Given that the area under the newly formed Corporation is undergoing rapid urbanisation, fuelled by the construction industry and the IT sector, vacant lands, common areas, and shared natural resources are under threat as is the sustainability of the area as a whole. The urban peripheral region is likely to be affected by the transposition of new power structures and hierarchies on to existing, contingent and locally negotiated and tenuous institutional arrangements around power sharing.

The diversity of social backgrounds, occupational status and interest politics in three different locations and the socio-spatial transformations that accompany the merger leads us to question the process of evolution of governing institutions themselves – will the new institutional arrangement be exclusionary, unjust? Will it be co-opted by elite actors and middle class interests that are concentrated in Salt Lake? Will the newly elected local government be captured by vested interests of developers working in the fringes? Or, will the local government carve out new opportunities for more just and sustainable, people-friendly and industry friendly mechanisms of governance? On the other hand, how does the socio-spatial merger affect the transformation of social institutions given the changes in values, norms, preferences, class relations, and aspirations and in turn influence the politics and governance processes?

In the next section I discuss the emerging relationships between these new and old actors, the reconstitution of the relation between land and labour and between older structures of power and new emerging centres of power and influence that simultaneously reinforce and challenge the status quo.

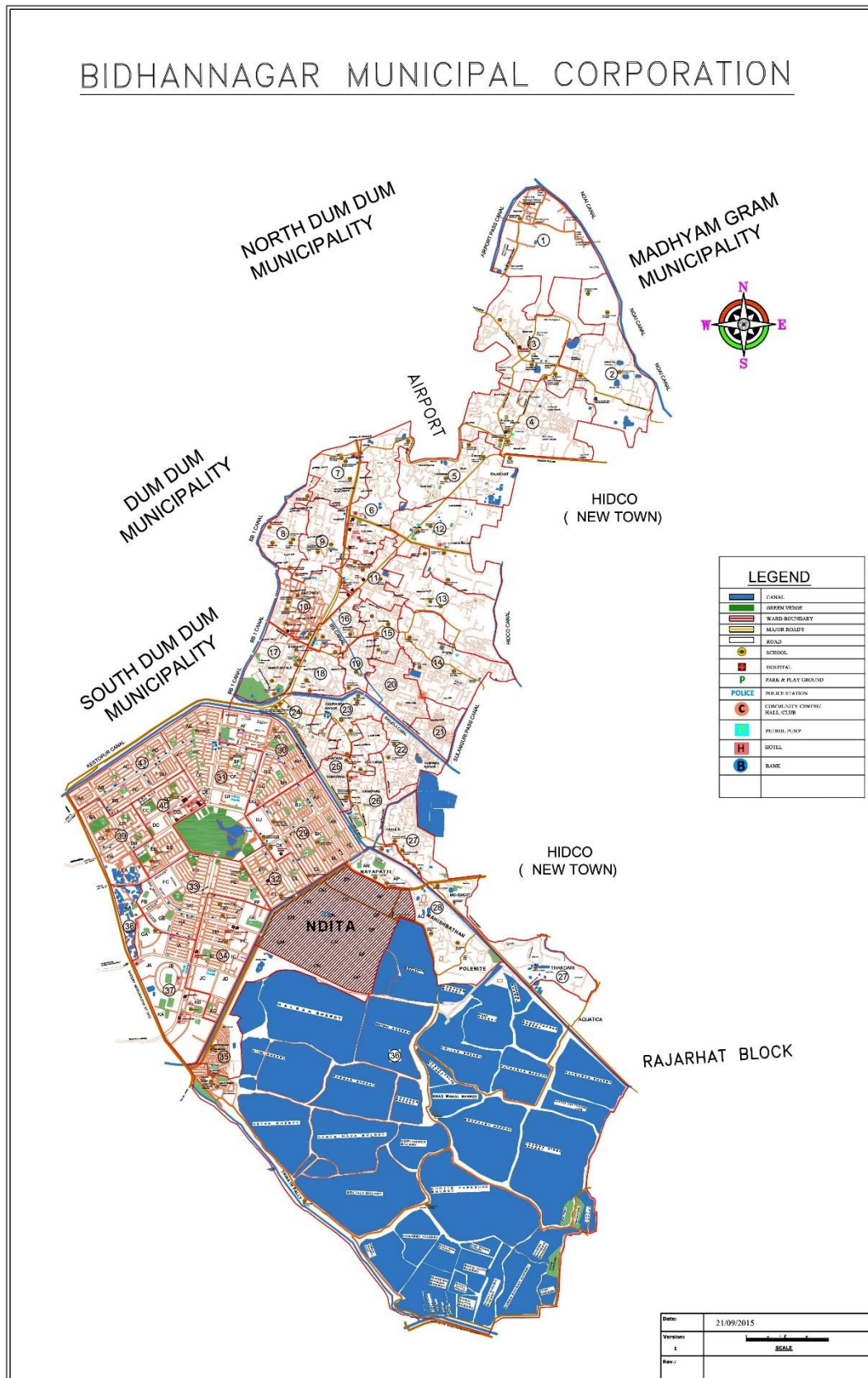


Figure 1 Map of Bidhannagar Municipal Corporation. Source: BMC website

4. Findings

4.1 The Village in the City

Prior to 1995, Mahishbathan was part of a larger fertile agricultural region dotted with dense villages with long histories of settlement, ponds, orchards and substantial waterbodies. Inhabited by farmers and fishermen, two thirds of who were from marginalised socio-economic groups - either the Muslim community or Dalit community, the locality was connected to Kolkata through the exchange of fresh produce, goods and services (Dey, Samaddar and Sen 2013). Landholdings were typically small and there were multiple tenure structures that enabled some to work as share croppers, as tenants, and even as farm labourers. Many inhabitants were engaged in fishing and in the trade and transport of fresh produce and fish. With the formation of Salt Lake city, Mahishbathan began to transform through a spillover effect as those unable to afford rents in Salt Lake moved into these adjacent villages. Villages received electricity connections, upgraded primary schools, and access to water (though filled with impurities), irrigation facilities and roads. Given that this area was already informally urbanized, there was little protest from the villagers to the proposal of the merger. In fact, for most villagers, this was welcomed given that they felt they would now be treated at par and get more money for development works and not be seen as the poorer cousin of Salt Lake city.

This facilitated new circuits of rent extraction and capital accumulation that mediated the relationship between older village inhabitants and the new migrants. Some villagers with extended and pucca houses became land lords, renting out rooms to the new migrants, often distant relatives, asserting new forms of social and economic power in the process. Residual lands along the wetlands and canals are being deliberately occupied by political force in order to settle the new migrants for a steep price, in exchange of the right to stay in those areas and access water and other urban infrastructures, away from the gaze of the state.

Hiru Ganguly (name changed) lives in Mahishbathan. He has a house with an orchard and with the transformation of the surrounding villages, he too built up his house to two floors, along with a row of small rooms in the orchard which he lets out. Though a landlord, he has worked as a driver in a logistics company for 25 years. The past two years, he has taken up the job as a private driver to a family living in the gated complex nearby as the hours are more relaxed. His distant cousins have rented rooms in the orchard. Hiru has also taken a hefty commission from his cousin's wife who has secured employment as a domestic help in the same family he is employed with. Hiru's wife does not work and his children are studying in English medium schools that have opened in Rajarhat. When asked about his choice to work as a driver, he articulated *"it is not out of a necessity. I am quite comfortable financially because of the steady rent I get. For a long time, I have not practiced agriculture though our family had a lot of land. It was increasingly difficult to find good agricultural labour. The New Town project changed this as my agricultural land was acquired and with the money I built the rooms for renting. I rent out to only known but distant relatives and*

they also benefit from this association. I choose to drive because I like to be out of the house. I am respectable person in the village and I ensure that I maintain my status”.

The families with larger land holdings (often belonging to higher castes or influential families with political clout) in these villages have also been able to sell of portions of their land to private developers to construct apartment complexes given that the regulatory regime is weaker in the village pockets and the gram panchayat colludes with private players to approve the building plans. While some villagers have rented out the extra space to new migrants, others have opened up small grocery shops, cable TV shops, mobile repair shops, tea shops, etc., revealing a changing village economy. Many of these products and services sold in the villages are extended to the residents of the adjacent gated communities. These new livelihood practices, entrepreneurial spirit, moving away from subsistence economy, an emerging sense of private wealth and competition and constant efforts to improve one's property permeate the village atmosphere. Thus investing in rental property has become a strategy for villagers to enter the informal land market in Rajarhat.

However, not all residents are able to seize these new opportunities, leading to a deepening of social and spatial inequalities in the villages. While the new urban economy is dependent upon the labour of non-skilled informal workers and have absorbed the migrant labourers as security guards, maids, drivers, construction labourers but many erstwhile farmers in the villages are skeptical about these kinds of jobs, which they consider undignified and underpaid and thus prefer not to these jobs (Basak 2013).

One newly elected local councilor said *“we have been here since our forefathers came here and made the land habitable. With the rapid urbanization, many have lost access to livelihoods. It is true some have improved their houses, but where do we go now? What do we do? Where will our cows graze? The big buildings will soon stifle us. Every inch of land now is up for grabs.”*

For some of the villagers, there is no choice however but to engage in menial jobs such as rag picking – these are usually the low caste and the most marginalised sections of the village population who worked as agricultural labourers, share croppers or fishermen in the wetlands that are fast being engulfed by urbanisation. Their huts are visibly in a dilapidated kuccha state and their families impoverished. They have also lost access to the commons which were essential to their daily life for feeding their livestock, or cultivating vegetables, or for their children to play, leaving these families in an extremely vulnerable state.

The social fabric of these villages, thus far from being insulated, are now sites of emerging conflicts over resources between original residents and new migrants and original residents, further disembodimenting the experience of place (Kundu 2017). These villages are actually very much at the centre of the constant processes of settling and unsettling that is remaking the urbanising landscape of New Town though in highly uneven, unequal ways and often by exploiting migrants and the most disadvantaged. As Gururani (2017) has argued, *“they sustain and accommodate the everyday life of an unfolding urbanism. These rural enclaves challenge the standard narrative of urbanization and urge us to consider how in the postcolonial context unlike the post-*

industrialized world, the urban is constituted materially and symbolically, by what lies outside of it or excluded from it”.

4.2 People as Infrastructure

Simone has posited that in the extremely marginalised and neglected inner city areas such as that of Johannesburg, there exist an incredible capacity for inhabitants of limited means to co-create spontaneously, very flexible and fleeting social arrangements that enhance the potential for economic and cultural operations. This conjunction – *“complex combinations of objects, spaces, persons, and practices”* is what Simone refers to as *“people as infrastructure”* – at once provisional and mobile, operating without clearly delineated notions of how the city is to be lived or used – and yet managing to bring together very different skills, resources, practices that enable them to reproduce life in the city with the only certainty that the outcomes are flexible and radically open ended. He posits this idea of a highly urbanised social infrastructure in contrast to the dominant idea of infrastructure as a physical entity – the provision of which through networks places people, objects and territories in a city in a way that it increase the idea of efficiency (Simone).

In the frontiers of urban Kolkata, which is marked by its distinctive lack of such complete and efficient systems of networked infrastructure (whether it is water pipelines, electricity supply, or roads) and population is scattered, density is low, and there is no distinct urban feel to the place, the concept of people as infrastructure takes on a different meaning. The Bidhan Nagar Corporation is still in the process of becoming an integrated functioning unit. This state of administrative limbo has led to a splintering of the geography and has impeded how inhabitants make sense of their surroundings and access basic infrastructure such as transport, water, electricity and garbage collection, particularly in the fringes of the Corporation.

Erstwhile farmers have become bridges for the apartment dwellers by providing services that are absent in the New Town. There is a vibrant network of informal autorickshaws that ply in New Town area responding to the needs of residents to access markets, schools, offices in the absence of public transport. Apartment dwellers in the periphery highlighted their dependency on the villagers for a number of their daily requirements. Mr. B. Poddar, a long-time resident of Greenfield Heights says, *“...the Atharotala market continues to exist because we (meaning the residents) protected it from being evicted by HIDCO. They are illegally occupying land and they charge us more for fresh vegetables and fish. But without the market, we would have had to go to Salt Lake which is 5 or 6 km away. In the absence of transport, how do you expect a retiree like me to go that far?”*

Debolina, a resident of an apartment complex in the peripheries, sums up the uneven and complicated nature of this dependence, shot through with class inequality and social tensions, *“The surrounding area of the village is basically dominated by Muslims. We have never heard of any communal issues in this region. They are very helpful in nature in fact all the service providers like drinking water, paper wala, milk provider, flower wala, maids etc. are from their community. Somehow we are dependent on them. As it was their land they keep on reminding us about the matter that we are living on their land”*. Thus the dependence is simultaneously built on an

economic transaction and an act of social “othering”, which distinguishes apartment dwellers from the villagers (Kundu 2017).

From the formation of local informal markets selling fresh produce collected from neighbouring ponds and fields, to informal tea stalls feeding the formal white collar workers to the construction labourer, to the supply of drinking water in housing complexes, the intricate web of autorickshaws that ply through the rural-urban divide, infrastructural gaps are being filled in by the village people (original residents and new migrants) who see an opportunity opening post the phase of being dispossessed of their lands and identities during the course of land acquisitions. In the absence of adequate physical urban infrastructure, people across the rural-urban divide have become part of the interconnecting infrastructure, filling in the gaps, through uneasy, temporary collaborations with unlikely partners born out of need in an unfamiliar territory. Much of these arrangements belie the confines of territoriality and involve potential economic risks as many of these arrangements are considered illegal – particularly hawking, illegal tapping of water and electricity.

Najimuddin, a hawker opposite DLF II in the Unitech area says, *“This shop that we have built here. HIDCO and the police obstructed us. We got around 3000 people out on the street and blocked the main road connecting DLF. The police came and but they ended up cooperating with us”*. Eviction threats are all too real and the administration sometimes destroys all the goods while at other times, the police and the administration may reach a certain agreement for the hawkers to operate their food stalls in these very visible spaces of Rajarhat New Town. For Najimuddin however, the risks associated with hawking brings back memories of being forcefully evicted from his family’s agricultural lands in the very same DLFII area. Yet at the same time, it also reveals a spirit of making new connections to survive – not only with the customers, but with the police and the HIDCO administration as well as collectively mobilising through the city wide Hawker Sangram Committee’s network.

Yet, people invest in these risky ventures based on an implicit trust and not always necessarily on traditional identities of belonging to the same religious community, village, kin or caste networks. Yet these are tactics of surviving a harsh environment that has in many ways refused to formally accommodate the erstwhile village populations into the emerging urban economy, expropriating their control over land and the means of production and stripping them of spaces to voice their grievances. The economic ventures people create are fraught with tensions, are extremely fragile and tenuous in nature and are dependent on their ability to flexibly negotiate changing regimes of rule and administration, be attentive to changing demands of customers and to mobilise themselves on more broad based social platforms to alleviate their risks.

4.3 The rise of the Syndicate Raj in Rajarhat New Town

The analysis of the changing social relationship between the different groups in Rajarhat New Town and its surrounding areas is incomplete without an examination of the ways in which it is governed, who are the actors that mediate access to votes, voters as well as infrastructure, open up informal spaces of deliberation and resolve territorial conflicts, and control the complex and dynamic logics of settling and unsettling populations over the periphery? Given the deep socio-economic divides

and fragmentation of political authority in the periphery, the pervasive fear and terror that accompanied the accumulation of capital through the expropriation of land, the emergence of a mixed rural and urban population with various competing claims and differentiated subjectivities of citizenship, as well as the presence of a surplus population facing expulsion from the circuits of corporate capital accumulation – it is important to understand how these tensions are being managed in the present day.

Historically, the social production of the eastern periphery of Kolkata is premised on unimaginable violence committed against farmers, sharecroppers, CPI(M) party workers, activists, women and others by a combination of politicians – administrators – police – criminal strong men from the late 80's onwards. For instance, Ruis Mandal, a strong man in the Thaakdari, Mahishbathan area, was nominated as an election candidate for CPI(M) from the area. In spite of being a history sheeter, with charges of murder and arson against him, he was made to win the election, thus paving the way for a reign of terror where oppositional voices were swiftly stifled. During his rule, the civil society organisations such as the farmers association and the *bhery* workers association from the area, who had struggled against the atrocities and exploitation of the landed gentry in the area, were dismantled. Internal opposition to the Party's collusion with powerful private players trying to assemble land chunks of land, was also quashed through violent means – thus making way for a "peaceful" land acquisition process in 1996.

The formation of extra-legal land procurement committees and neighbourhood committees that made it possible to co-opt opposition parties and have them coerce and convince the farmers to give up their land at prices which were priced at far lesser rates than the market and the government rates supplemented the actions of the "strong-men" cum politicians who used their capacity for violence to exude control over territories, dispense their own justice, and make decisions with respect to life and death. Political fortunes and positions in these coveted extra-legal structures of mediation became the vehicles to consolidate power as well as immense personal fortunes.

For example, the MLA of CPI(M), Rabin Mandal held on to his seat for close to two decades, and used his political clout to become the Chairman of a Special Purpose Vehicle called Bhangar Rajarhat Area Development Authority, through which he controlled the power to control private developers access to urbanisable land. At the time, TMC MLA Tanmay Mandal was also made a member of the LPC and this further dampened chances of popular protest over large scale land acquisition. Tanmay Mandal was later sacked by Party president Mamata Banerjee for his alleged involvement in the Vedic Village land scam in the area which exposed the complicity and deep imbrications between the then ruling party, the opposition party, the district administration, private players, the local police and criminals in the use of violence to grab land from farmers. Hansen and Seputtat have thus argued that "*The gangster, the underworld, or the informal sovereign who has become "a law unto himself" are, in other words, central to the endeavors of governments and police forces to produce legitimacy, and to perform the sovereignty of the state.*" In many ways, we see that the rule of individual 'big men' subsumes the state and the rule of law, highlighting how the distinction between state and market is increasingly blurred.

The nature of governance regime in Rajarhat shifts post 2011 when the TMC won the state elections with a resounding victory over the Left Front Government. Land and anti-land acquisition were the central plans of TMC's bid to overthrow the regime of Left rule. While BRADA was dissolved on charges of appeasing private interests in land, there emerged a political vacuum in New Town area which was being administered by parastatals (HIDCO and NKDA) but had no urban elected local body. Although it appeared as if these Special Purpose Vehicles were empowered to bypass the local elected bodies at the village level, especially regarding land acquisition and land development and planning decisions, this period saw the rise and consolidation of the power (and personal fortunes) of the panchayat leaders from TMC. Jehanara Bibi is one such powerful figure from Patherghata who acts as a formidable leader and a mediator between the multiple stakeholders and their conflicting claims to the periphery. She proudly proclaims, on being asked about her role in the area, *"I stand as the most approachable person in this case. HIDCO approaches me to empty lands and villagers also approach me negotiate with HIDCO. So I am everywhere. Panchayat is a good governance in Rajarhat where matters are resolved within hours and which benefits all."*

Jehanara begum is a strong woman in her own right and has a long association with the area. She was elected to the Patherghata gram panchayat as the Pradhan in 1989 from TMC. She went on to consolidate her political clout by becoming the Rajarhat Panchayat Samity Savapati in 2003. She will be completing two full terms at the Zilla Parishad covering Bishnupur, Chandpur and Patherghata. She confidently responds that she takes decisions on behalf on the Panchayat as well given her long years of experience. While sceptical of the possibility of the formation of an urban local body in Rajarhat New Town, she maintains that she is integral part of the decision making processes in the area – from settling hawkers by negotiating with HIDCO, to deciding what slab of rents they should pay in the newly constructed hawker's market, to convince farmers to give up their lands for development, to listening to the issues faced by migrants and helping them access services. Jehnara Begum however thinks that the current regime of rule is one that is markedly more peaceful than the strong-men dominated CPI(M) era- *"CPM used to send bouncers wearing red turbans and young boys on motorbikes to capture lands, once upon a time. Now, it is negotiated. TMC rule is peaceful"* reflecting a broader party strategy to consolidate its power base and move away from oppositional politics to one that is more grounded in the question of governance.

Informal sovereigns are certain non-state actors, with a capacity for violence, who act as vote aggregators for the party in power but also have some autonomy within their own territories with respect to rule-making, providing housing and services to 'informal' residents, facilitating real estate/ infrastructure deals or becoming real estate developers themselves. Their public authority is constituted by making public decisions and providing services as non-state actors but while referencing the state (Lund 2006). Instead of individual sovereigns who sustain the rule of the regime, Rajarhat New Town is governed through a complex, ever shifting alliance of different Syndicates – both labour based and material supply based. Though seeded during the CPI(m) era in a bid to appease land losers in the area, today the Syndicates act as informal structures that not only provide muscle and money power to elected

representatives but they also help to marshal political forces in support of local political leaders and to protect their political and economic turf. It is a complex assemblage of hydra-headed organisations – blurring significantly with land losers collectives, local “para” clubs, and lower level of party workers. In exchange of their ability to collect money, the labor and the materials supply syndicates get privileged access to construction projects, contracts, etc.



Figure 3 The political nexus with Syndicates. Source: Newspaper

These Syndicates are shown to have significant decision making powers in the governance of the highly uneven fringe areas of the Corporation: (i) control over labour and material requirements of the periurban economy (ii) ability to mobilise large numbers of people and votes (iii) influence decision making with respect to the development of urban infrastructure networks in and through villages where real estate developers are flocking to.

Some of the elected representatives who were interviewed professed widely varying opinions about the Syndicates. One of the elected councilors from the Salt Lake area complained that the Syndicates had become a menace and were supplying inferior quality material for a premium. They were able to wield this power over the construction business because they were armed, violent and often had the support of some party leaders. For an elected representative from erstwhile Mahishbathan panchayat area, who is also actively involved in the local social club, syndicates are nothing but peoples collectives that were formed during the state driven land acquisition drive by the LFG. These state sanctioned bodies were formed so that land losers could be rehabilitated through skilled training and by gaining a foothold in the changing economy through contracts for supplying building materials or labour. This representative insisted that the media had wrongly portrayed this “peoples collective” as a criminal and violent mode of organizing the local unemployed youth. This view was publicly corroborated by the Mayor of Salt Lake, Sabyasachi Dutta, who said, *“I am simply looking out for the underprivileged in my area. They look to the construction business for employment.”*



Figure 2 Photograph of a banner showing the Syndicate's support for Mayor Sabyasachi Dutta.
Source: Newspaper

With strong infighting and regular territorial clashes erupting regularly between TMC factions in the Rajarhat area, the gradual institutionalization of syndicates raises the question whether this will ultimately challenge the authority of established leaders and ultimately the rule of TMC, or will their continued presence consolidate TMC's presence in a fractured, volatile, and highly differentiated urban periphery. These multiple sovereigns thus point to the constant blurring between the business of politics and the politics of doing business in a regime of rule onto themselves and evokes close connections to the state to gain legitimacy in the eyes of other stakeholders.

4.4 The Unsettled City

For the planned township of erstwhile Bidhan Nagar Municipality, which is largely populated by an urban middle and urban middle class population, it means being clubbed together with areas which are underserved in terms of basic infrastructure – piped water supply, underground drainage networks, sewerage networks, etc. An uneven property and land use regime plays out across the three territorial units – Salt Lake has lease hold properties only, with strict laws about transferring of property and even in terms of land use conversions. However the other two areas have freehold property regimes. There is an underlying unease amongst the city dwellers of Salt Lake city that their needs will be overlooked in favour of the more pressing concerns and political pressure from the added areas. There are also claims that the direct, face to face contact and access to the local elected officials will change once the delimitation takes place and thus people will be removed from the decentralised governance of the urban local area. “This is vote bank politics. The demography of the

three areas is vastly different and it would be disastrous to merge them” said a lawyer from the Salt Lake area.

In the checkered development politics of the periphery, Salt Lake city has been deliberately left out and neglected in the past four years since the merger. This is particularly a sentiment that is voiced by middle and upper class propertied citizens who feel that they have been central to the growth of Salt Lake, its identity as a peaceful urban area with excellent amenities. Their ties to the place has been cemented not only through their social and cultural bonds that have developed over time in the neighborhoods, but also through the municipal taxes they have diligently paid to the urban local body in exchange of services.

Retired bank official Soumen Chatterjee, who lives in AG Block of Salt Lake, is uneasy about law and order. *"All funds are likely to go to Rajarhat-Gopalpur because that area has more voters. Problems like syndicate wars might spill over.... It's a lose-lose situation for us,"* he said. *"Salt Lake and Rajarhat (Gopalpur) have two separate characteristics in all aspects. They also have socioeconomic and cultural difference. We are very apprehensive and doubtful as to how these two areas with separate identities could function together"* said Kumar Shankar Shadhu, Secretary, Bidhanagar Welfare Association.

The fears are not misguided given the political undertones of the merger. Krishna Chakraborty, the last chairperson of the erstwhile Bidhannagar Municipality (TMC) said her party would develop the backward areas without neglecting the rest. *"Families grow. Everyone has to work together for the whole family to prosper. For the next five years, Rajarhat-Gopalpur will be our focus, but not at the cost of Salt Lake."*

4.5 Red to Green to Saffron: The shifting politics of the periphery

Some political commentators have astutely observed that it was a deliberate political strategy to add Mahishbathan (II) and Rajarhat Gopalpur Municipality areas to Bidhan Nagar Municipality in order to regain control over the urban area in the Lok Sabha elections of 2016. Elections were delayed for a considerable time to enable the merger of the three areas and the formation of the Corporation. However, Opposition parties to TMC (particularly the Bharatiya Janata Party) have been gaining ground in the Bidhan Nagar urban area with the increasing dissatisfaction that the urban populace of Salt Lake city have faced with the urban local governance. Residents and businesses have developed a fear the Syndicate Raj that now mediates development activities and offers “informal protection” to businesses in Salt Lake, and whips up votes for the party in return of the political patronage they receive. Though these informal power brokers were somewhat more controlled during the era of the LFG rule, given the total penetration and control of the party machinery over the bureaucratic and administrative structures of governance, there is a distinct shift in their operations under the TMC rule. Given that the TMC as a party lacks the organizational structure of the LFG, it has also been at the mercy of these informal power brokers at the local and regional level to ensure control over voters. “Syndicate, as is being imagined, is not a centralised network. The local power brokers under the patronage of regional strongman form the mainstay of the syndicate. The regional strongman could be a political leader of any party, not just TMC’s” (The Wire, 2016). And even within the TMC, party leaders from adjoining or overlapping

territories in rapidly urbanizing areas such as Rajarhat, are competing against each other to curry favours with the Syndicates. Severe infighting within the party, particularly between the Mayor and the Deputy Mayor who respectively control syndicates from Rajarhat Newtown and Rajarhat Gopalpur areas, have led to policy paralysis and deteriorating services in the newly merged Corporation. Bidhanagar Corporation area has also been embroiled in the most bitter and violent clashes across rival factions of TMC supported syndicates given the real estate boom in the area. However, in a recent turn of events, TMC has demanded the resignation of Salt Lake Mayor, Sabyasachi Dutta, who also happens to be the MLA for New Town Rajarhat. Sabyasachi's growing closeness to the BJP and his openly anti-TMC statements led to the party stripping him of his powers.

5. Conclusions

The paper attempted to explore the different contours of relationships that are emerging between the different groups of actors in the periphery of Salt Lake city – particularly between the erstwhile villagers, the new migrants to the erstwhile villages, and the citizens of Salt Lake city. Migrants remain largely invisible and immensely vulnerable – they are kept in a state of permanent impermanence as they are selectively handed documents and ID proofs to consolidate their claims to land, housing, services, jobs etc. They are not allowed to collectivize although they are encouraged to support the local powerbrokers during elections.

The erstwhile villagers on the other hand, have a graduated and differentiated access to the new economy jobs or the option to rent out land. They lack skills or the drive to get involved in some of these new forms of informal labour – but are part of the circuit in other ways – as middle men or intermediaries brokering information, land deals, renting houses, creating connections to local political strong men and parties, getting connections to services, connecting to government agents who will provide an identity or documentation proof to new migrants. “Here having the right information and building fluid, provisional relationships with powerful builders and political actors is key to social mobility” (Kamath and Raj).

The fragile ecosystem of syndicates, local intermediaries, para statals and party functionaries belie any definite forms of institutionalization of governance structures but remain powerfully open ended, a highly contested field, where each actor tries to influence the other or subvert the other, or negotiate the terms of trade-off between political allegiance and economic gains, straddling the urban and rural divide. The powerful Syndicates are open in their support for heavyweight party functionaries such as the Mayor of Bidhan Nagar Municipal Corporation, which was manifest in their show of strength in numbers during the filing of his nomination and also in the public display of congratulations upon his victory in 2016.

The urbanising landscape is one that is patchy, fragmented and extremely volatile. There are elements of the village that seep into, sustain and change the dynamics of urbanisation. The circulation of capital happens through the calculated informality that creates differentiated spatial values and the control over labouring bodies.

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